Feeling Powerful and Being Powerful:
Virtuosity and Expressive Individualism in World of Warcraft

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for ASTR Confrence 2011, Montreal

"Economy of Showing"

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Draft 1 November 2011

Conference Abstract:

Inherent in performance and theatre is the necessity to show something to an audience, and often the "show" attempts to portray some element of reality, to communicate an idea or social critique, revive or enhance a memory, represent or illustrate. In this working session, however, the conventionally conceived "show" of theatre is less important than are performance events that seek to "show off." The organizers welcome participants wishing to explore relationships between commodity and consumer in the space of the show ring, the competitive floor, and the political arena where spectators consume bodies—human, animal, and other—on display. We are particularly interested in genres of performance that exaggerate reality and manipulate it, accentuating, heightening, and distorting a perception of "race," breed, skill, beauty, sexuality, or gender. Examples include, but are not limited to competitive dance, animal showing and performance, performance of celebrity (e.g., in politics, industry, entertainment, athletics), and so on. Themes of marketplace, commodity, exploitation, and consumption are obvious points of entry into the economy of showing, but like the conference itself, we are open to proposals that address "economies of showing" broadly.

My Abstract:

World of Warcraft is one of the most popular online video games in the United States, with millions of players who log on every day to play with others in an imaginative high-fantasy universe. This research examines the practice of 'raiding' in World of Warcraft, in which groups of 25 people engage in half-hour long epic battles with computerized opponents called 'bosses'. In raids players carefully coordinate their activities according to a preset strategy in order to defeat a boss. Raiding is thus a performances: a worldly instantiations of generalized scripts for action. This paper examines how players 'show' (evince) their potency in and through raiding despite the fact that none of the participants are visible -- and hence available to the gaze of -- the others. It examines how the virtual world of World of Warcraft enables and forecloses various sorts of self-realizations, desires for which derive from the actual world of their primary socialization: The United States. The event of raiding thus becomes a virtual locus for real concerns with authenticity and sincerity, teamwork and success, and potency, personal integrity and achievement. A complete analysis of Warcraft's economy of showing, I conclude, must examine both the spectacle itself (the virtual worlds) as well as it's wider context (the actual world) in order to understand how performance is both an exaggerated representation of masculine control of violence as well as deeply compelling referendum on who they really are. In this way, raiding becomes a high stakes arenas in which raiders' sense of self and competency is established through public demonstration of virtuosic mastery of game mechanics.

Our tree druid was *pissed:*

> I think as a whole, our guild qualifies for the minimal requirements of our toons (dps, spell pwr, whatever). A more important focus for improvement is in following strats -- listen to the raid leaders so you know what your targets are and when to switch them, know how to watch/control/be aware of your aggro, know how not to die, honor every fight with your best flasks food and effort. It isn't our gear, our dps, our heals, our tanking that is keeping us from success on heroics. Its our behavior, our willingness to commit a few hours to someone else's leadership. Its our allowing vent to be so busy with nonsense we can't hear what the strat is. Its our arrogance in deciding we know enough about the fight that we dont even pay attention and just do our own thing.

Layla -- that was the tree druid's name -- was pissed, and the reason was the Old God Yogg-Saron. In order to understand why, we need to enter her lifeworld and the distinctive cultural economy of showing that existed within it. Her quote is littered to technical terms -- toons, strats, dps, aggro, taking -- that render it impossible for cultural outsiders to follow. But once these are unraveled another set of terms emerge: her anger that people have not improved, that they are arrogant and do not pay attention, that they "lack willingness to commit a few hours to someone else's leadership" and, most powerfully to me, that they do not "honor every fight".

In this paper I want examine the connections between these two terminologies: between the technical terms that belong to one world, and the emotional goals that originate in another. Doing so will, I reveal, claim that both worlds are 'real'. The means to do so is an understanding of economics, the Aristotelian ordering of the house, which speaks not only to the way in which our revelations are viewed by an audience but how it orders our own domestic experiences, evinces our inner selves and proves to us that we are who we think we are -- and who we hope we can be. And in order to understand that, we must understand how slaying an Old God at the bottom of a Titanic Prison, albeit a digital one -- no wait, *especially* a digital one -- can be a definitive experience that shows us just how hardcore we really are.

Part One The Virtual World: World of Warcraft

Background: World of Warcraft and Raiding

When Layla complained about her compatriot's arrogance, I was a year or so into anthropological fieldwork with a raiding guild in World of Warcraft. World of Warcraft is the most popular online virtual world in the US. The game is played by 2.5 million people in the US and

11 million players worldwide, where it has been translated into seven languages and is played in North America, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, Mainland China, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Macau (Blizzard Entertainment 2008). The game's incredible success made Blizzard, the company that made it, one of the leading lights in the entertainment industry. World of Warcraft is set in a "high-fantasy world" in which players pay a monthly fee to create characters (what Layla calls 'toons') of different "races" (orcs, dwarves) and "classes" (mage, warrior) and then play them with thousands of other people who are logged on at the same time as they are. Players kill monsters and complete quests in order to gain experience and "gear" (armor and weapons). Over time their characters "level up" starting at level 1 and working until they reach "level cap" (currently level 85).

There is a lot to do in World of Warcraft, and people play the game for lots of different reasons. Layla and I played to raid. Raiding involves a group of 25 players who enter a raid 'instance' (a dungeon, a prison, a castle, a haunted mansion) and kill a 'boss' (a computer controlled monster) in a 'boss fight'. In boss fights there is a division of labor between players based on what characters they play and what the strategy (or 'strat' as Layla calls it) is. The simplest strategy for a boss fights is the 'tank and spank': one heavily armored player (the tank) keeps the boss angry and attacking him while three 'DPS' (damage per second -- the mages and rogues and warlocks) attack the boss and 'burn the boss down' while a single healer 'keeps everyone up' by casting healing spells on the tank and DPS when the boss damages them. dps can't cast healing spells, tanks can't heal, and healers can't wear armor: it is only by working together and using their specific skills that players can succeed.

In reality, boss fights are never a simple tank and spank, and the encounters that Blizzard has created requires strategies of extraordinary complexity. Yogg-Saron, boss Layla was worried about, is arguably one of the most difficult fights in the game, rivaling in complexity the legendary battles against Kael'thas Sunstrider Layla and I participated in hunched over our computers — she in Viriginia and I in Hawaii — in October 2008.

Yogg-Saron lives at the bottom of Ulduar, a raid instance created by the Titans (think: space-faring Norse deities). Constructed millennia ago, the Titans built Ulduar as a prison to hold Yogg-Saron, an 'elder god' in H.P. Lovecraft style: primordial, tentacled, and apocalyptically

evil. Throughout the millennia Yogg-Saron slowly corrupted the various Titan guards within Ulduar and when the Dwarf explorer Brann Bronzebeard first rediscovered Ulduar it become our duty to defeat Yogg-Saron before he could break free of his bonds and engulf the world in madness.

The boss fight for Yogg-Saron, or 'Yogg' as we called him, goes through three phases. In the first phase, raiders must first battle Yogg's humanoid avatar Sara while managing to avoid being blow up by the weirdly elephantine guardians that assist her. In the second phase of the fight the Old God spawns, all tentacles and gaping mouths, but is immune to all damage. Most of the raid must attempt to stave off the endless waves of tentacles while a small small group of raiders travel through special magical portals into the interior of Yogg's mind. There the small group finds itself inside a series of nightmare rooms whose apparitions must be killed. Once this is done the small group has access to Yogg-Saron's brain itself, and can finally damage it. Because raiders will go insane after spending a full minute in Yogg's mind, they must constantly teleport in and out of his mind, damaging his brain in short busts while the wider raid attempts to stave off his physical body's tentacles. Finally, in the third phase of the fight Yogg himself is finally vulnerable to damage, and party members must kill the now-vulnerable god. The entire fight is on a timer -- if more than fifteen minutes passes, Yogg will instantly kill everyone, and the raiders will be forced to resurrect their characters and begin the fight again.

The Yogg fight: a diagram explaining phase 2 strategy from an online strategy website

A "Kill Shot": a memorial screenshot of a guild having successfully killed Yogg-Saron in front of his corpse. For the picture, several members of the guild have mischievously transformed themselves into Wolvar (humanoid Wolverines). Character's names appear above their heads, with the guild name ("Purpose") underneath

My Guild: Power Aeternus

One does not find 24 other players ready to fight Yogg-Saron just wandering the world of Warcraft. Rather, raiders create 'guilds' of like-minded people to raid with. Guilds are that classically American type of organization: the voluntary association. If Warcraft is a world, then my guild was my society, the group in which I moved, my support network, my team -- a cross between the regulars at my neighborhood bar and a military platoon. Layla and I were members of a guild called Power Aeternus (PA) and our guild has a split focus: on the one hand, the guild had been around for over five years, the birth of World of Warcraft, and was a close community of friends. On the other hand, it was dedicated to raiding. This mixture of goal-oriented play and diffuse, enduring solidarity is what made the guild so compelling but also, as Layla complained, so problematic.

Guilds are built into World of Warcraft: any player can get a guild charter from an in-game guildmaster (for instance, Jondor Steelbrow in the Dwarven capital of Ironforge), collect the signatures of fellow players, and then turn it back in. Result is a series of guild-related perks designed by Blizzard to make it easier to 'guildies' (people in the same guild) to connect. for instance, we had a private guild chat channel so that we could talk, or rather type, to whatever guildies happened to be online at the time. We had a guild bank, where players could donate items for general guild use. The game had a built in information pane about our guildies, so if we needed some armor made or some magical gem cuts we could find the person who could do it. Life without a guild was a cold, lonely existence. Life in a guild meant friends, discounts, resources, comraderie -- everything.

Our guild used this built-in mechanism and customized it to create something that was truly an institution. All guilds have generic ranks, for instance, which control who can do what. In our guild we customized these ranks to reflect the importance of raiding to PA: we had a guild leader, a presidential figure who often remained aloof from dispute, weighing in only on big issues. There were two raid leaders, who took turns acting as executive officers for the guild, actually leading our raiding activities. There was a council of Officers, who served as the day-to-day managers and administrators for the guild, making policy and solving disputes. Below them there

were the 'Aeturni' of full-time raiders, the 'Powers' who raided part time and formed the 'bench' of the guild, and then lower ranks for friends and family who wanted to hang out on guild chat.

The guild also created places to meet outside of World of Warcraft. We had a website with forums to discuss guild issues and to vet applications from potential members (there was a form you had to fill out to be a member of our giuld), and a 'Vent' server we could log on to which allowed us to communicate *viva voce* with each other via headsets. When Layla and I were trying to down Yogg, PA was over five years old and had been through a couple of different guild leaders and was still going strong. We had, in other words, taken the basic guild mechanism structure built into the game and added to it to create a full-fledged institution which has out-lasted the individuals who started it to create an enduring cultural system.

In sum, these guildies were the people we raided with, our friends and compatriots -- the people who we fought Yogg with, and the people who drove Layla nuts. In order to understand why, we must understand more of the 'how' of raiding.

Raiding is a Performance: Technically complex, affectively powerful, and a moment of realization

Technically complex

As my description of the Yogg fight suggests, raiding is a technically complex, goal-directed activity — like putting together the futon frame you bought at Ikea, or solving a Rubik's cube blindfolded. At the end of the day you have killed the boss or you have not, and there are more and less efficient ways to do so. The technical challenge of raiding coordinating your activity is the main reason that raiding was 'fun' for my guildies. As the guild leader put it in one forum posting, "Everyone wants to have fun when they come to raid, otherwise they wouldnt come. To me, killing bosses is fun. To me, seeing a well oiled machine execute to its fullest capabilites is fun. I take no greater joy than seeing this guild progress."

He is not alone. Consider the case of Jeebus, for instance, a twenty-something who works the night shift in a cheese factory in Minnesota sneaking in play time in between turning over sixty-pound blocks of industrial sized cheese to let them age properly -- "You know, you work 4pm to 4am there's a whole of time for raiding during work" he tells me. He plays Warcraft six to

seven hours a day, and wishes he could play more, but can't because of his job. The pictures of himself he's posted on the website are of a smiling young man who is just about as broad as he is tall, a young man whose body has been shaped by the requirements of nocturnal cheese turning. On his off nights he gets drunk, plays Warcraft, gets on vent, and goes on hilarious obscenity-laced rants about how terrible it is to turn cheese for a living. Sometimes he does this at work. Raiding is central for him. As he put it in vent one night, "You know there's social environment its fun and all but raiding gets you that sense of purpose in the game, I suppose, and its there's just something about raiding that makes it click. There's a lot more pressure and with a lot more pressure comes a lot more reward from the game. You know you got you, yourself and 24 other people if you can accomplish this it's a wonderful event. I really do enjoy the raiding I wish I could do it more."

"It's sort of the pressure and achieving the goal of raiding kinda?" I asked him.

"Yup," he says, "overcoming adversity if you will."

Succesful raiding is like gender: a performance. Raiders must know the 'strat' -- the 'strategy' -- and must be able to work together to perform the complex mix of actions necessary to defeat the boss. At the same time, the random nature of boss fights (like the random nature of all life) means there are always new and unexpected things in every boss fight, even if one knows the strat well. Good raiders, then, are both on-script and flexible, and seek to minimize uncertainty even as they are ready to cope with it. Raid encounters are high-pressure, ritualistic activities in which players learn to repeatedly perform the same actions in a more or less identical way in a coordinated manner in order to kill a boss.

<u>Affectively powerful</u>

It is one thing to talk about the five steps necessary to control Yogg-Saron's tentacles, but it is quite another to attempt to actually try to kill the damn thing. In contrast to abstract descriptions of raiding, the actual process of raiding can be overwhelming. The first time you pull a boss the result is almost always a buzzing mass of confusion: the raid explodes into a kaleidoscope of lights and sounds as spells -- both your own and the enemies' -- bust across your screen and out of your headset. Tentacles burst up out of the ground at random locations, the other members of the raid suddenly seem to the be right on top of you, or suddenly far away. People begin dying

instantly -- in some cases, because of lag in the conneciton, you don't hear them shouting for heals until after they have died. A player next to you suddenly has a glowing purple skull over his head -- is that a good thing of a bad thing? An icon pops up on your screen and your character begins wandering around aimlessly, and you are unable to control it -- why? Suddenly the words "IZZYCOHEN AND ARIAN ARE LINKED" pop up on your screen in huge blue letters and it means... what?

Abstractly, you know the strat because you have read it online: during the Yogg fight two characters are sometimes randomly 'spirit linked', and that one of the tentacles can 'fear' party members, causing them to wander around and become unresponsive to their player's commands. This abstract knowledge of the game inevitably fails to translate into well-coordinated action the first time you log on. It is only repeated practice -- dozens of attempts on the boss -- that ultimately render the situation legible to you, and lead to victory.

Malaby describes this sort of process as "collaborative action in urgent conditions," and suggests that it "is highly generative of trust and belonging." (Malaby 2007b:63). Phenomenologically, one experiences flow similar to that experienced by professional musicians or athletes in the course of skilled performance (Csikszentmihalyi 1991). Technically challenging, phenomenologically intense, emotionally compelling, and deeply connected with self-esteem and group membership, raiding involves serious investments of time and effort. As a result, successful downing a major bosses is an incredibly gratifying experience that build bonds of friendship and trust for raiders who undertake it, celebrated on guild websites with 'kill shots' of raiders posing in front of the boss's corpse. Raiding is important to people because of the extreme emotions that raiders have when they do it -- or perhaps the other way around. When a raid is successful, you feel validated. When it is not, you feel upset, frustrated, and angry at yourself or other people. Successful raids make you feel great -- bad raids make you feel terrible.

Performance of Identity

This combination of technical goals and emotional affect make raiding a performance in second way: not only are boss fights particular instantiations of a general start (tokens, as Peirce might say, of types), they are also performances of identity -- events in which people's self-

understanding as competent or incompetent, capable or incapable, supports to their guild or causes of group failure, are played out. Consider, for instance, this long quote from Holyhealz, one of PA's raid leaders:

> "Personally I really enjoy pushing the pace, challenging myself: how hard, how efficient I could be, how much I could push damage, how I could survive. That sort of thing was the first reason why I chose to raid, and that continues to be a motivating factor. Eventually it really became about when you achieve common goals, as a group you really build strong camaraderie and strong connections. When you're raiding in Molten Core and you're killing bosses for the first time and doing sever firsts or close to server firsts, it was [sic] an incredible high. And the amount of people yelling on vent when we killed Ragnaros was amazing. It was like nothing has even been louder. There will always be those first kills that I remember."

Here Holy moves through the three different moments in raiding: an initial interest in technical virtuosity, the creation of a community through raiding, and finally the idea that his experience raiding is central to his biography: "those first kills that you will always remember" are worth remembering because of both the technical difficult and "strong camraderie and strong connections" between raiders. Although not as central in other things in his life, such as his formative experiences growing up in a devout Lutheran household or career as a database programmer, raiding provides a biographical narrative for his life, a string of events whose integration in a story orient him and give his life meaning. This discussion of power of raiding to change human relationships -- both for better and for worse -- indicates the emotional aspects of raiding indicate that raiding is an activity there is another thing that raiding creates: people.

Progression and Its Publics

This claim may seem far fetched and requires elaboration and ethnographic substantiation. In this section I argue that there are two ways in which individual boss fights get built out and strung together to form a biographical narrative that is greater than the sum of its parts. These are the concept of 'progression' in raiding, and the 'public' that raiding elicits. Both of

these, I'll claim is what makes raiding a project, and a place in which the self is elicited and displayed.

First: progression. Raiding becomes a source of biographical narratives because it itself is organized as a story. Each boss is just one part of a wider 'instance' or dungeon, and raiders must learn to kill all of the bosses in an instance -- what they call 'clearing' it. In order to get to Yogg-Saron at the bottom of Ulduar, for instance, you must first defeat Flame Leviathan, the mechanical guard at the entrance, three bosses in the antechamber (Kologarn, Auraiya and her pet cats, and the Assembly of Iron, a boss fight that involves three opponents). Then the four Titan watchers of Yogg must be defeated, and finally General Vezax must be overcome. Only then can you fight Yogg and say you have 'cleared' the instance (WoW buffs: note I'm not explaining to the professors about the optional bosses).

Beyond the instance there is what raiders call 'progression'. There are multiple instances in World of Warcraft, and some are more difficult than others. Only by killing bosses in easier instances and acquiring their loot -- a process called 'gearing up' -- can you become powerful enough to take on bosses in other instances. As raiders say, attempts to fight bosses when you are 'undergeared' are doomed to failure. This progression of one instance after another follows the overall story arc of the game work. When Blizzard revealed World of Warcraft 2.0 "The Burning Crusade", for instance, they revealed to players an entire realm called Outland -- a new continent, basically -- ruled by the evil Elf-Demon Illidan Stormrage. Illidan overthrew and imprisoned the previous ruler, Magtheridon, with the help of his two minions Lady Vashj and the Kael'thas Sunstrider. The goal of the expansion was to defeat Illidan, who lay in wait atop the Black Temple, an instance in Shadowmoon Valley. In order to even enter the temple, however,

players must first 'progress' through 'content': through progression: they must slay Gruul, the overlord of the Outland Ogres, and then Magtheridon (each with their own instances).

After this they will be geared up enough to move on to Serpentshrine Cavern, where they must slay five bosses before finally taking down Lady Vashj. After this, players may advance to Tempest Keep, a floating fortress, kill the three bosses there, and then take down Kael'thas Sun-strider. Once Vashj and Kael are 'down' players are 'attuned' to The Battle of Mount Hyjal, where there are four bosses to kill before taking down Archimonde. Only then may players proceed to the Black Temple, where there are eight bosses to kill before facing Illidan Stormrage himself.

In sum, the process of clearing instances in order mirrors the narrative arc of the Warcraft universe, which in turn parallels players' sense of their own advancement and growing competence as players. Thus: progression.

Even though your performance in raid is visible only to the 24 other people in the instance with you, clearing instances and progressing through content is an activity that has its own public. Guilds worry about their progress, of course: Layla's complaint was that our guild was taking too long to clear Yogg. But there are other, broader publics: To avoid the overcrowding that would come up from putting 11 million people in the world of Warcraft, the population of World of Warcraft is spread out over hundreds of distinct 'servers' -- identical copies of the world. There are over 200 servers just for the US alone. Experienced members of PA measure our progress by comparing it to the progress of other guilds on our server. Doing so is not very hard -- most players of Warcraft don't have the time or, frankly, the obsessive energy necessary to take part in a guild that can field twenty-five full time raiders focused on progression. Even

though there are thousands of guilds that attempt end-game progression, on any individual server there are only a handful.

In fact, the lives of serious raiders can be brutal. Raiders join and leave guilds, guilds form, triumph over computer-controlled bosses, and then explode in acrimony and anger. After a while, you start getting to know one another. As you raid more and more, you develop an almost Zen-like ability to see the forest from the trees, and instead of seeing your server as a groups of guilds at various points in the progression, you see it as a pool of raiders interested, talented, and geared enough for raiding for whom guilds are just temporary waypoints. Raiders on a particular server know one another, know about the creation and death of new raiding guilds, attempt to recruit one another, and in general form a community knowledgeable about raiding and the social situation of raiding guilds on their server. Thus the community created by the project of raiding is server-wide. If guilds are like teams, then, servers are like leagues.

There are even wider contexts in which raiders form a public. Raiders are aware not only of progression on their server, but also progression across servers. World-first, EU-first, America-first kills are recorded on a variety of websites, and servers are judged in terms of how 'hard-core' they are -- which is to say, where the raiding guilds on a particular server are in pro-gression on average. In the weeks before the release of Warcraft 3.0, for instance, my guild began sponsoring runs with other guilds in order to push our progression, just to make sure people could look back at our server's progression through Warcraft 2.0 and not be ashamed.

Hard-core raiding guilds will recruit new talent on Blizzard's Warcraft forums, and play-ers will pay to move their characters from one server to another in order to find the right guild for them. The tone of these recruitment messages vary, but in general they run the gamut from

bullshit masculinity to an almost corporate appeal for professionalism. One guild ad, for instance, reads:

> At Ordo Domus, we believe the most important factor in success is having every raider be on the same page about what is expected of them and what the goals of the guild are. If every player in a raid is dedicated to giving his or her maximum effort and continually improving themselves, bosses will drop in short order. At OD, we are committed to creating an environment that fosters players with attitudes like these.
>
> We are progression-focused guild on [the server called] Exodar (PvE EST) that has currently cleared all content, and are looking for a few members to fill key spots in our raid roster as we prepare for Ulduar Hard Mode Encounters. Our ideal applicants are abled and experienced raiders who are skillful and knowledgeable with their class and are willing to commit the effort necessary to compete towards end game progression. This means not simply clearing content, but racing for server-firsts against other top rival guilds.
>
> Please note, we are looking for full time raiders, NOT backup bench raiders. We raid Sunday through Thursday, from 7 to 11 EST and require 60% attendance rate from our raiders, no exceptions.
>
> Our methods are surprisingly simple. A zero tolerance policy for drama. A fair DKP system that rewards attendance. A stable and tiered leadership that is engaged, accessible, and even-handed to members. A performance incentive system that rewards players who improve and punishes those who do not. And an attendance policy that is flexible enough to accommodate our members' schedules but consistent enough to promote progression. That's it.
>
> So if you feel you have the necessary skills and attitude, and hunger for a chance to down bosses and compete for server-firsts, head over to our website www.ordodomus.com and fill out an app.

In an attempt to keep track of progression across servers, Warcraft enthusiasts have even created websites like wowprogress.com and wowjutsu.com, which systematically scours the World of Warcraft Database and uses complex mathematical formulas to calculate who is where in progression, both globally and on a server-by-server basis. 'World-first' kills immortalize guilds for ever.

Progression in raiding, and the multiple publics it creates make raiding a project in a Sartrean sense, a biographical engagement of great depth and power. Raiding is a 'project' in the Sartrean sense -- from the moment that Blizzard releases new continents, cities, and dungeons full of monsters, raiders have raced to see who can progress most quickly to the final boss. For raiders the measure of your success and how 'hard-core' you are comes from how far you are in progression.

The crucible of raiding offers the opportunity for melt-downs, but it is also a place where souls can be reforged. To be a successful raider, players must become mindful of their own performance, but must also be team players. They must learn to deal with anger and frustration in productive ways. Most of all, they must learn that their performance will be judged, both by other raiders and by enormous imaginary monsters who can not be placated, but defeated. A good raider, in other words, is someone who learns from their mistakes.

This idea of Warcraft as a space of personal transformation and learning might sound a little clichéd coming from a professor, but I am not the only person to notice the way personal growth spans both classroom and raid context. When I first floated this idea in an op-ed piece in Inside Higher-Ed, a teacher -- who is in my guild -- commented

> I've taught for many years both in college and High School on a number of various science courses... I try to remind myself that some people are jerks and bullies because their personal life is poor. I can't rectify that therefore myself and the class will always have a price exacted. I've seen actual personal growth in a number of players with regards to maturity, empathy and leadership. These games afford unprecedented opportunity to grow or regress. To think that so much more has yet to come with virtual cultures leaves me rather amazed and hopeful. I found

When this raider writes that raids afford "unprecedented opportunity to grow or regress" the key word is "regress". As crucibles, raids offer a chance for people to learn and grow, but not everyone takes that opportunity and, to be fair, there is no real reason that they should. Some raiders become frustrated and quit the game. Others convince themselves that they already know everything and the wipes are because of the mistakes everyone else is making. For some it leads to frustration and an endless circle of ineffective coping mechanisms that result in still more failures. Many -- most, perhaps -- simply decide the entire thing is not worth the effort.

Yogg-Saron and the Paradoxes of Hardcoreness

It is for this reason, the way that raiding is connected with self-presentation, that Yogg-Saron posed an existential threat to PA. Not just because he would, if unleashed, wreck havoc on all of Azeroth. No, our inability to kill him was a challenge to our real selves rather than our virtual personae. We considered our selves hardcore raiders — or at least if not 'hard core' in a gratuitously addicted, OCD sense of the term, then 'medium core' in terms of our abilities. Raiding was a project to us — an important part of who we were. Perhaps not as important as other, more

deeply biographical projects like our jobs, families, and other connections rooted in the meat-world. But important nonetheless. We wanted to be feel powerful — we wanted to be powerful. The economy that confirmed for us who we were was that of raiding. You could bitch and moan, you could explain away your failures, you could engage in elaborate self-deception, call the grapes that you could not reach sour. But at the end of the day you either had a boss kill under your belt or you didn't, and that was something that you — or anyone who right clicked on you to view your achievements — knew you had accomplished. Or hadn't.

What, then, were the qualities of a good raider? What were the hallmarks of someone who was truly a hardcore raider? Let's take a second look at Layla's complaint:

> I think as a whole, our guild qualifies for the minimal requirements of our toons (dps, spell pwr, whatever). A more important focus for improvement is in following strats -- listen to the raid leaders so you know what your targets are and when to switch them, know how to watch/control/be aware of your aggro, know how not to die, honor every fight with your best flasks food and effort. It isn't our gear, our dps, our heals, our tanking that is keeping us from success on heroics. Its our behavior, our willingness to commit a few hours to someone else's leadership. Its our allowing vent to be so busy with nonsense we can't hear what the strat is. Its our arrogance in deciding we know enough about the fight that we dont even pay attention and just do our own thing.

Layla, like many raiders I know, insists that success in raiding in not a question of the "minimal requirements of our toons" -- in other words, having characters who have the right equipment to be successful in the encounter. The avatar is just the beginning. A real raider follows strategies and listens to raid leaders, to "commit a few hours to someone else's leadership". It is about "honoring every fight" rather than 'getting aggro' (doing so much damage to the boss it stops attacking the tank and starts attacking you). A good raider is not arrogant. Does not talk over others. They are humble, work hard, come prepared, and execute the start in order to execute the boss. Let me spin out some of these threads.

As one PA raid leader once put it, "The core of power aeternus is one of struggle". As a medium-core guild, PA struggles to find a way to raid successfully while still retaining its close bonds of friendship. At times people even think of PA as 'family' -- as one officer wrote on the forums,

> "I think we have a lot of challenges confronting us as a guild whether its with our constant struggle to be better, our command and control and ranks. We have a tremendously talented family in Power Aeternus who all want to see us prosper and flourish. Be open with one another, and be respectful .. as Exo put it so eloquently last night .. there are real living breathing people behind these toons who all deserve to be treated with respect... The strength of Power Aeternus is it's family - while we have our moments we have undoubtedly perservered in the face of adversity. We have been in existance nearly as long as WoW has been out - It is a testament to the dedication of the leadership and its members. I am here to serve you and to help make Power Aeternus a better

place. It has been an honor and a joy to be part of this, and to help us move forward. I hope you feel the same."

Respect is important because the same intensity of the raid makes it a place where friendships and communities are forged, but the flip side of that intensity is that it can also pull each other apart. In true American fashion, my guildies in PA saw a contradiction between the needs of society and the needs of the individual — between what was required to be effective in raid (at least in terms of one's solo performance) and what the guild and the group needed as a whole.

For it was the human, communal dimension of raiding that was a key dimension of success for raids. There is broad agreement in the guild that a successful raid is more than the sum of its parts, more than having high-quality gear. A successful raid requires an elusive extra ingredient -- what some have called a "positive raid atmosphere" or "taking the raid seriously". For Layla, "honoring every fight" is key to a successful raid -- a kind of commitment that requires humility (rather than arrogant self-confidence), submitting to leadership, and coming prepared with both magical flasks and food as well as a thorough knowledge of the raid strategy. In fact, as she said in a guild meeting shortly before she wrote this post, "gear is not making us better, its hurting us by thinking we're too good for stuff." For her, powerful weapons which make fights easier are a hinderance to the guild, because they make us believe we can complete a raid without having any focus.

This self-restraint, humility, and attention to details are difficult to maintain in raid for at least two reasons. First, when raids go wrong, the group is not clicking, and no one is in the zone, it is easy to feel frustrated and helpless -- there is no better recipe for stymied anger than failing when you are trying your hardest. Actually that's not quite true. A close runner-up in the 'best recipe for stymied anger' contest is having other people who you rely on fail to do their job. When this happens, things get ugly. As one shadow priest put it, "when things don't go good, we tend to turn in vent on each other, and we say degrading and demeaning things to people". This leads to what an officer called our "Touretts [sic] moments" -- cussing at each other on vent. Supressing emotion and submitting to authority -- even the authority of a raid leader who you feel is mismanaging the raid -- can be difficult.

But there is a second reason that honoring every fight is difficult. PA's biggest problem is not aggressive, bullying, performance-obsessed players. Rather, PA widely acknowledges that its

achilles heal when it comes to 'honoring every fight' is not people who push to hard, but rather people who do not push hard enough. In discussion end-game raiding in Burning Crusade, the first Warcraft expansion, the guild had difficulty pushing through to the end of progression, and in response the guild leader noted that "the only thing that holds us back is our focus and raid mentality. We've got the gear, we've got the experience, it just seems that some of us dont seem to want to focus". Many feel that, as one person put it, members should "always be mature and in control. There's no need for anyone to be a WACKED-OUT RAID NAZI" As one raid leader remarked, "Dont get me wrong, I dont expect everyone to sit in their seats at attention from 8:45 till midnight. What fun would that be," but he still insisted that "We do however need to put forth the maximum effort when we are at a boss... If we wipe because you are goofing around and dont care to pay attention, shame on you!"

The signs of 'lack of focus' or 'complacency' are pretty clear to members of PA -- lack of preparation, not showing up to the entrance of the raid instance on time, and especially talking in vent, which drives people nuts. As one raider put it, "if you're talking on vent and you don't have something constructive to say, then STFU. If you expect the rest of the raid to be focused and determined, then don't start telling jokes in the middle of a fight or just having a conversation on vent."

Ideally, PA tells itself that one need not chose between focused play and friendship and community. "Can we be a top level raiding guild without being cursing bitching A-holes? We can do that too. Not sure that kind of stuff is what makes a 'Hard core' raiding guild anyway. I am pretty sure results and effectiveness are what makes guilds hard core not how bad you can make people feel every raid." Writes on raid leader. Another writes

> "The only respect to which we are 'casual' is that we do not require raiding by our members. There are simply perks for those who do raid. However, if you step into an PA raid, and do not perform to the level in which we absolutely need you to perform, and you do so on a consistant basis, you will lose rank and priviledges alike, and find a hard time getting into a raid."

But beneath these assurances was a deeper sense that there was a tension, perhaps unre-solvable, between being an effective, performance-focused raider and being a kind and consider-ate person are incompatible. "We try to have people together that like to play together, that like to have fun, that are mature, but are also highly skilled," said one raid leader, reacting to criticisms

about PA's lack of performance in raid. "Unfortunately, being highly skilled sometimes goes hand in hand with not having the best personality, or having a really good fit in the guild."

These 'highly skilled' players push themselves but they also push others -- because raiding is more important than friendship, they are unwilling to be considerate of others, or so says the consensus in the guild. That, according to many members of PA, is not a recipe for healthy raiding. The guild is keenly aware that it is one of the older guilds on the server, and indeed one of the oldest in World of Warcraft. It does not want 'drama' which could threaten its unity, even if the source of that drama is raiders pushing towards a goal that everyone ostensibly shares.

Nevertheless, there is a sense that hardcoreness -- the attempt to maximize one's performance or, as Holyhealz put it, "pushing the pace, challenging myself: how hard, how efficient I could be, how much I could push damage, how I could survive" was fundamentally at odds with group play. The drive for maximal agency, on this account, was seen as antithetical to the needs of the broader community.

Part Two: The actual world: American culture and expressive individualism

Expressive Individualism Online: Two Economies of Showing

At this point something should be becoming clear: the dynamics of raiding -- evincing hard-coreness, and managing the tensions between individual and group -- all occur in the virtual world of World of Warcraft. But the cultural shaping of these practices derives from outside of it, from the culture which forms the primary locus of socialization for raiders: the United States. Raiding is not merely a practice in which one shows one's self to be a hardcore self, it is also a place where deeper concerns of American culture are at play. Scholars of virtual worlds increasingly follow Tom Boellstorff's distinction between the 'virtual' and the 'actual' when describing in-game and out-of game contexts in which humans live their lives. In this section I describe the way in which actual-world cultural structures form the basis on which virtual practices of self-presentation are based.

Speaking of 'American culture' involves operating at a level of generalization so broad as to be useless -- something our Canadian location should remind us of. Nevertheless I do believe such a generalization is warranted, provided that we understand its limitations. One of the key themes of this culture that I'd like to discuss here is what Charles Taylor calls 'expressive indi-

vidualism'. This unique cultural form began, says Taylor, in early modern Europe and continues to function today. It is the idea that human beings feel a natural urge to live their lives according to rules and principles that they find by looking within themselves. A real life, an authentic life, is one in which you express what is inside yourself.

Such a focus on expression often portrays individual authenticity as at odds with the needs of the group. As Taylor writes, ""self-definition comes early to be contrasted to morality... Indeed, the very idea of originality, and the associated notion that the enemy of authenticity can be social conformity, forces on us the idea that authenticity will have to struggle against *some* externally imposed rules" (1991:63). This possibility is something that has received extensive elaboration in American culture, the country that invented both football rallies and the Dukes of Hazard. The result is what Claude Fisher calls a 'covenental self': "Americans managed the tension between their commitment to personal ends and their commitment to community through the evolving idea and practices of voluntarism, a covenant or contract between person and group" (Fischer 2010:96). Richard Madsen's account of political activists in San Diego exemplifies this covenental dynamic in terms which are nearly exactly those used by my fellow raiders:

> "To be a member of a community means to fulfill the social dimensions of one's humanity through interaction with others. Belnging to a community does not, though, entail sacrifice of oneself for the good of the group…. [A]n individual must resist the twin temptations of submerging oneself in the group and of denying one's responsibilities toward the group" (Madsen in Fischer 2010:99).

In this section I want to examine raiding as an economy of expression -- as a virtual locus for the actual-world patterns of expressive individualism. I will argue that there are two ways of understanding the evincing of self online. The first, incorrect view is to understand expressivity online as a form of artistic or aesthetic creation. This view is extremely popular because it has considerable cultural appeal -- that is to say, it is the model predicted by cultural models of expressive individualism. On this first account, the virtual world Second Life epitomizes what virtual worlds can and should be. The second understanding of online economies of showing -- the one which I hope to convince you is correct -- views expressive individualism online as more akin to craftwork. Such an approach is less intuitive, but I believe the discussion of raiding above demonstrates that it does greater justice to the experience of raiders in PA. I would claim that Warcraft touches our soul more deeply, and taps into the essence of our humanity much more deeply than Second Life. My "epic entertainment experiences" with PA speak more to the "hu-

man condition" than Second Life's world of shopping for a new look. And more than that -- I can explain why the creators of Second Life would believe otherwise. Behind the conflict between Second Life and Warcraft, I'll argue, is a deeper and more important conflict between the lens of American culture through which we see the world, and what the broader and more grounded perspective of anthropology reveals -- between, in other words, how Americans imagine them and and their selves, and what anthropology tells us about how we as human beings make our lives together.

Expressivity as Artistic Creativity: Second Life

Since the inception of the Internet -- indeed, in its first imaginings by science fiction authors such as Vernor Vinge -- the Americans who invented it did so in their own image. As Fred Turner points out, the Internet is like LSD: Designed by a cold-war military industrial complex and quickly put in the service of American projects of self-expression. These projects were romantic ones (Streeter) in which expressing individuality was understood as an aesthetic act similar to artistic creation. Just as the creative artist reaches inside themselves to produce artwork that authentically represents the interiority of the artist, people leading real lives are 'express themselves' by being 'creative'.

Thus despite the fact that virtual worlds have been around for decades, they entered the consciousness of the American mainstream in a major way in 2006 when Robert Hof ran a story on the virtual world Second Life -- Anshe Chung, an in-game land developer, had become the first person (at least known to date) to become a millionaire buying and selling virtual property. For a brief moment Second Life had its fifteen minutes of fame: a complete world in which you could create anything you want, own anything you want, and sell it to others.

Second Life claimed to be something bigger and more ambitious than just a 'game': it was a life, and your second one at that, a place where you could realize the potential that, due to your socioeconomic status and personal appearance, you could not realize in the actual world. This culturally specific notion of creativity as being central to human life was explicitly thematized by Second Life's designers. For Cory Ondrejka, a designer of the world, individuals live authentically when they realize themselves through creative action, paradigmatically figured as artistic creation by a romantic artist: Ondrejka, for instance, claims that Second Life's in-game object

creation feature are emancipatory because "content creation has traditionally been the domain of elite artists" (Ondrejka 2007:34). Here 'art' is refigured as 'content' and the player as a romantic genius. This, for Ondrejka, is the difference between 'games' and 'worlds': He argues that massively multiplayer videogames feature "strong game fiction" and "measuring progress via increase in experience points… " while in proper virtual worlds "residents create their own fictions and communities, imbuing them with meaning through interaction." (Ondrejka 2008:230-31). All of these claims can be seen in Ondrejka's line that "Second Life is real. Real creation, real business, real communities all created by real people." (Ondrejka 2007:31).

Second Life is marketed using these ideas as well. The introductory movie on the Second Life website features images of the game world followed by a series of sentences which read: "What is Second Life? A place to connect. To shop. To work. To love. To explore. To be different. To be yourself. To free yourself. To free your mind. To free your look. To free your life" In one wonderfully condensed form, this cultural artifact describes what it expects potential customers to want: a place where they can be themselves (that is to say, to be different from others). A place where they can free themselves, their minds, and their lives as well as 'their look'.

Not expressing yourself, or not being creative, is considered unhealthy, or at least not fulfilling. Even Warcraft's own advertising, featuring Mr.T and William Shatner as players of the game, emphasizes the way Warcraft is a liberating experience because it allows you to "be who you want to be" (apparently, a powerfully destructive Shaman in the case of Shatner).

This sense of the Virtual Reality as a locus for expressive individualism has caused some to denigrate World of Warcraft and its preprogrammed victory conditions as a mere 'game' rather than a true 'world'. Warcraft was a game with a goal -- two dirty words in an age when programmers and venture capitalists were trying to create whole worlds where you could decide what your goals and aims were. In Warcraft all you could do was kill stuff with a magic sword, but Sweden was opening an friggin' embassy in Second Life.

Soon virtual worlds could be very roughly clumped into to camps: 'games' and 'worlds'. 'Games' like Age of Conan, Warhammer Online, and Aion advertised themselves through downloadable trailers which featured fully-rendered 3D graphics of muscular heroes and improbably dressed heroine kicking ass and taking names while Lord Of The Ringsesque music thundered in

the background. 'Worlds' like Second Life, There, and Free Realms advertised themselves with movies of actual game play and slogans like "meet new friends" and "Be different. Be yourself". Warcraft was for male teenager geeks. Second Life, one got the feeling, for adult women. Blizzard's corporate mission statement says that the company is "dedicated to creating the most epic entertainment experiences ever" while the makers of Second Life say "it's our mission to connect us all to an online world that advances the human condition".

Even game designers felt the need to make their games open-ended stories of heroic self-exploration. For people involved in game design who are part of this culture, the key is to design games in which people 'role play' or become 'heroes' or feel that they are realizing something about themselves as result of immersion in the story line of the game. For them, game worlds reach their full potential exactly when they allow users immersion in a satisfying storyline and imaginative identity. Thus Richard Garriott, a famous role-playing game designer, contrasts games with strong story lines to goal-directed games such as World of Warcraft:

"As many kudos as I would like to give World of Warcraft, it's basically a remake of EverQuest, just incredibly polished and refined," he said. "There are harbingers of failure in that model. Everyone in these games is obsessed with the concept of how much damage-per-second they are inflicting and maximizing their D.P.S. When you do that, you are no longer playing a role; you are playing an inventory-management game." (Garriott in Schiesel 2007) .

In sum, Warcraft and Second Life represent two different views of the future of virtual worlds: entertainment on the one hand, and bettering the human condition on the other. On a deep level the developers of Warcraft and Secondlife implicitly employ different views of human nature itself: pleasure versus expression, entertainment versus creation, obedience to the structured rules of a game versus the unfettered freedom to create as you chose.

Expressivity as Craftwork: World of Warcraft

There is considerable cultural appeal in understanding virtual worlds and locations for self-expression in an artistic mode. Such an approach does not explain the experiences of raiders, however, who are deeply and personally invested in evincing their selves through raiding. Nor incidentally, does it explain why World of Warcraft is so much more popular than the supposedly

more appealing world of Second Life. One of the casualties of America's culture of creativity is the disparagement of craft work. As Mike Rose has demonstrated, in America today we tend to value the mind over the hand, the artist and thinker over the waitress and plumber, and white collar work over blue collar work. In his study of electricians and hairdressers at work, Rose demonstrates that blue collar work requires as much if not more intellectual work than white collar jobs, despite the fact that these jobs are considered low-status and low-prestige, and some of them -- such as waitressing -- pay far less than 'skilled' labor.

Political scientist and philosopher Richard Sennett has gone even farther in describing the complexities of craftwork as a form of human activity that differs from creativity in three ways. Creativity is the work of the lone artist or painter, while craftwork is often done by teams of or groups of people. Creative insight tends to occur in a 'flash' as the result of sudden 'inspiration' while craftwork takes time, and is responsive to the material it works on -- the unique problems of a housing site or the subtle shift in the grain of a piece of wood. Creativity is often imagined to be unteachable -- a unique endowment of a natural genius, while craftwork is the result of tradition, its methods passed down from one generation of artisans to the next. Finally, the ultimate goal of artistic or creative work is to express the inner subjectivity of the artist, while the craftsman's goal is good work for its own sake -- to make the best cabinet or wineglass possible and, in doing so, honor the wood and glass she encounters, rather than using it as a canvas upon which she can impose herself.

While Second Life epitomizes American notions of creativity and personal fulfillment, Warcraft exemplifies the craftwork described by Sennett and Rose. I have described raiding as a 'project': an activity which creates a community and a public which literally spans the globe. True, Warcraft is hardly hands-on work -- like Second Life, the most physical Warcraft gets is accidentally dropping food on your keyboard when you try to eat while playing. But as Sennett notes, some of today's forms of craftwork don't involve much physical activity. He begins his book on craftsmen, for instance, by discussing Linux programmers, who craft computer operating systems out of zeros and ones.

Like most forms of craftwork, raiding has a goal and is not open-ended, as Second Life is. Like most forms of craftwork it is communal, and requires a team of fellow craftsmen to

complete the work, even as learning the art of raiding requires a community and tradition of more experienced players to train and teach you. Successful raiding requires a steady, daily grind of practice as raids wipe on bosses again and again, slowly refining their technique. And, at the ends of the day, raiding raid for the satisfaction of raiding well -- like all craftwork it is an end in itself. Indeed, as we have seen in the previous chapter, a good raider must set his ego to one side for the good of the group and the kill.

Warcraft is much more popular game than Second Life, and although it is sometimes hard to tell why people vote with their feet, I believe that one of Warcraft's greatest appeals is the fact it does require a sense of craftmanship to play. Even casual gamers who spend time levelling up toons in the game's rich world develop a deep, habituated sense of the game's mechanics -- when to cast the heal so that it goes off in time, even if your character is being interrupted by mobs, when to add armor with a little more strength because the character's dps feel a little low, an instinct for when the prices in the auction house are too high or too low.

People in Second Life engage in a certain kind of craftwork as well. Second Life's object creation tools allow in-game creators to hone their skills to produce everything from sexy lingerie to rideable flying snails. Indeed, I would argue -- against the intuitions of Second Life's creators and perhaps many of its residents -- that Second Life is successful and its residents flourish when they become active parts of communities based on in-game projects. The fact that Second Life gives you nothing to do is not an invitation to open-ended, expressively-authentic self-realization, it is boring. But once a community springs up around a project like building a miniature version of London or writing the best poetry, the world becomes interesting. In other words: the more Second Life resembles World of Warcraft, the more compelling it becomes.

In summary, we tend to valorize 'virtual worlds' like Second Life over 'games' like World of Warcraft because of the way American culture emphasizes individual creativity and self-fulfillment. There is nothing wrong with this, of course -- I'm sure there are many people who enjoy expressing themselves in Second Life, and more power to them. But such an outlook is, from an anthropological point of view, inadequate to the job of understanding virtual worlds. Anthropologists, historians, philosophers, and others have found that humans tend to work together on projects which require care and attention. We are not by nature expressive individualists --

except those shaped by American culture, who are. Using the lens of expressive individualism leads us to overestimate -- even misunderstand -- the value of open-ended 'worlds', and it leads us to underestimate and miscrecognize the fulfilling craftwork that goes on in 'games'. Once we step back and look with anthropological eyes, we can see that it is Warcraft, not Second Life, that is the more deeply human of the two virtual worlds

Conclusion: Real Worlds

I hope we can see now how a middle-aged woman glued to her computer in Virginia can come to rely on the death of an Old God to prove to herself and others who she is, how the performance of raiding makes visible a certain desirable self for her, and how true assumption of this role must be tied to a group effort.

Such an understanding has implications for how we understand life online, and how we might orient ourselves to an understanding of online projects which as less cultural appeal than, say, Second Life's focus on creativity as a form of expression. Finally, it shows us that economies of showing need to be considered not only in terms of the surface they present to the audience, but the interiority that evincers make evident to those who regard them. I'm not convinced that many of the topics discussed in our papers are really about 'economies' of showing so much as they are contests or, to use Appadurai's phrase "tournaments" of showing. In focusing on how such tournaments require "accentuating, heightening, and distorting" surfaces in order to be victorious, we may lose sight of the way that, in Western cultures (but not others -- cf. Strathern) showing is also a way of demonstrating inner truths. Although we may tend to consider 'showing' as simulation, modification, dissembling, or other variations from an unmarked 'everyday' position in which hyperbolic presentation is lacking, all presentation is to some extent a presentation of self (Goffman) — whether marked or not as 'performance' and whether the performers recognize this fact themselves. Indeed, the example of Warcraft indicates that the more hyperbolic and unrealistic — the more virtual — these economies of showing are, the more enabling of certain types of meaningful and 'real' revelations they may be capable of displaying.